

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A1**NEW YORK TIMES
30 January 1987

CONTRAS ARE FOCUS IN 7 INVESTIGATIONS

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 — Several Federal agencies are pressing on with at least seven criminal investigations of the Nicaraguan rebels and their American backers even as President Reagan is urging Congress to provide new aid for the contras.

A review of the investigations has uncovered several previously undisclosed — and so far unproved — charges involving the contras as well as investigations that had not been previously known.

For example, Congressional sources disclosed this week that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had opened a criminal investigation to determine what happened to most of the \$27 million for nonlethal supplies for the rebels that Congress approved in 1985. A General Accounting Office report published earlier said most of it could not be traced.

Investigators also disclosed in the last several days that the G.A.O. had begun a separate inquiry into the whereabouts of millions of dollars that were apparently supposed to be funneled to the contras from the sale of American weapons to Iran.

Other open investigations, most of them previously known, focus on charges that the contras or their backers smuggled arms, trafficked in drugs, laundered money or violated the Neutrality Act, which bars Americans from involvement in military efforts against countries not at war with the United States.

In addition to these inquiries, a special prosecutor and two Congressional committees examining the Iran-contra affair are investigating charges of illegality tied to the contras.

New Aid Is Sought

The investigations pose a dilemma for the Reagan Administration. As it pushes for additional support for the contras, the Administration is also compelled by statute to investigate reports that the rebels might have broken the law. The Administration is asking Congress for \$105 million in aid for the contras for the fiscal year that begins next October.

Investigators say President Reagan's outspoken public support for the contras has made it difficult for prosecutors and other Federal agents to carry on their work. Law enforcement officials have repeatedly denied accusations that, because of Administration pressure, their inquiries were unnecessarily slow or incomplete.

The investigations are being conducted by a variety of agencies, including the Justice Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Customs Service and the General Accounting Office, among others.

Prosecutor May Take Over

A number of the investigations are expected to be turned over to the special prosecutor in the Iran-contra case, Lawrence E. Walsh. In announcing his appointment as independent counsel, a three-judge panel asked Mr. Walsh to investigate the sale of weapons to Iran and the reports by the White House that millions of dollars in profits from the sales had been diverted to the contras.

He was also given authority to study charges that the contras received other possibly illegal support in their war against the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua.

These are the Federal investigations known to involve the contras or their supporters:

¶An investigation by the United States Attorney in Miami of charges that weapons were smuggled to the contras from a Florida airport in 1985.

¶An investigation by the same office of a Miami-based cargo carrier that has been involved both in the Iran arms sales and the secret efforts to supply the contras.

¶An investigation in Georgia of the sale of four small planes, including one reportedly sold to the contras in 1985.

¶A criminal investigation of what happened to the \$27 million Congress granted to the rebels in 1985.

¶A separate investigation by the General Accounting Office of the Iran arms case.

¶A Federal investigation of charges that the Americans taking arms to the rebels also smuggled drugs.

¶An F.B.I. investigation of a burglary at the offices of a group that has opposed the Administration's policies in Central America.

Arms Smuggling Charged

The United States Attorney in Miami, Leon B. Kellner, has been involved in two of the most widely publicized investigations.

The first, begun in 1985, involves allegations that a large quantity of weapons were smuggled to the contras from an airport in Fort Lauderdale. The purported shipment could have been a violation of the Neutrality Act.

Early last year, prosecutors were confronted with charges from a man who asserted that he had helped in the shipment. The witness, Jesús García, was then in prison awaiting sentence on weapons charges.

With information from the F.B.I. and the statements by Mr. García, Mr. Kellner's office opened an investigation that continued through 1986. A grand jury took the case last fall.

The inquiry has been subjected to criticism from, among others, Senator John D. Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat whose office has studied the case. He has said that the investigation moved too slowly and that valuable witnesses and evidence were ignored.

But Justice Department officials, including Mr. Kellner, have denied the charges. They say the inquiry has been hindered because, in some cases, witnesses have offered one account to reporters and lawmakers, but are unwilling to provide the same account to prosecutors.

Pressure by Meese Denied

The officials note, for example, that nobody has been able to offer testimony indicating that he saw anything more than a few large weapons being loaded in Fort Lauderdale. News accounts have indicated that tons of arms were sent from the Florida airport.

Mr. Kellner denied reports indicating that he had come under pressure from Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d to delay the investigation to prevent damage to the Administration's contra-support campaign.

The second investigation by Mr. Kellner's office involves Southern Air Transport, a Miami-based cargo carrier involved in both the Iran arms sale and the secret efforts to supply the contras. According to law-enforcement officials, the Customs Service in Miami brought the case to Mr. Kellner late last year.

The Customs inquiry, involving potential violations of Federal arms export laws, was prompted by the crash in Nicaragua last October of a C-123 cargo plane containing weapons meant for the contras.

Crewman Seized by Nicaragua

The only surviving member of the four-man crew, Eugene Hasenfus, was released by the Nicaraguan Government last month and has been extensively questioned by the Customs Service and the F.B.I. The special House committee investigating the Iran-contra affair questioned Mr. Hasenfus today.

In interviews, Mr. Hasenfus has said he worked for the Central Intelligence Agency. Southern Air, formerly owned by the C.I.A., has acknowledged that it held a contract to service planes used in the operation.

According to officials, F.B.I. agents have begun a separate investigation of the C-123 crash, although their inquiry has not yet resulted in a grand-jury review in Miami.

The Customs and F.B.I. investigations were suspended for more than three weeks last autumn at the direction of Attorney General Meese. Mr. Meese said he sought the delay at the urging of Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, then the national security adviser.

The propriety of the delay is now under investigation by the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility and by the F.B.I., officials disclosed.

In Macon, Ga., the Customs Service and the United States Attorney's office have led an investigation into the sale

Continued

of four small-engined planes, including one that was reportedly sold to contra forces in 1985. The short takeoff and landing planes were manufactured by Maule Air Inc. of Moultrie, Ga. One was bought in 1984 by a company then headed by a retired Air Force major general, Richard V. Secord.

General Denies Wrongdoing

General Secord has emerged as a leading figure in the dispute over arms sales to Iran and the diversion of funds to the contras. He is also reported to have had extensive involvement in efforts to supply the contras.

According to published accounts, General Secord has acknowledged that his company sold the plane for \$49,000 to the contras in 1985. But in an interview today, General Secord's lawyer, Thomas C. Green, said he had no knowledge that the plane had been sold to the contras. The general, he said, "emphatically" denies wrongdoing.

Justice Department officials would not discuss other details of the case, although they said that a grand jury in Macon was trying to determine if exports laws had been violated in the sale.

Congressional aides say the F.B.I. in Washington is also conducting a criminal investigation to find out what happened to the \$27 million in "humanitarian assistance" Congress granted to the Nicaraguan rebels in 1985. The investigation followed a report last year by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, that said investigators had been unable to determine what happened to nearly two-thirds of the money.

According to the report, investigators found at least one instance in which money was spent on ammunition and grenades, a violation of the Congressional act that provided the aid.

At the request of at least three lawmakers, the G.A.O. has begun a separate, extensive investigation into the Iran arms deal and what happened to the profits, some of which were supposedly intended for the contras.

Officials on Capitol Hill said the G.A.O. had been asked to determine exactly what had happened to the money paid by Iran. Tens of millions of dollars from the sale are still unaccounted for.

"The bottom line is that the G.A.O. is supposed to find out where the hell that money is," one official said.

The drug-related investigation concerns evidence uncovered last year

that the military supply operation to the rebels also smuggled drugs on the return trips.

According to Administration officials, investigators in El Salvador acting on information from the D.E.A. learned that the American flight crews covertly ferrying arms to the rebels returned to the United States by way of Panama, a major drug transshipment center, to pick up cocaine and marijuana. The special White House Commission investigating the Iran-contra affair is studying this allegation, officials said.

The Justice Department announced this month that it had requested the F.B.I. investigation into a burglary last November at the offices of a prominent Washington political group that has opposed the Administration's policies in Central America.

Organizations opposed to the contras are hoping that the bureau's investigation will be expanded to study 35 similar incidents that have been documented around the country over the last two years. The groups have said the break-ins might have been organized by conservative groups supporting the Nicaraguan rebels.

For the moment, however, the Justice Department has said it will deal only with the break-in at the Washington offices of the International Center for Development Policy. The center has said that its files were ransacked.